

WILD TURKEY RESTORATION

The Eastern wild turkey was found throughout Iowa when the first settlers crossed the Mississippi River in the 1830's. Oak-hickory forests covered nearly 7 million acres and settler's records indicate turkeys occurred wherever timber existed. Turkeys may not have been as numerous in Iowa as in their primary range east of the Mississippi River, but they were plentiful enough to be used as table fare and appeared in markets for 50 cents apiece.

Uncontrolled hunting and habitat loss led to the elimination of turkeys from Iowa. By 1956, the primitive forests had been reduced to only 2.6 million acres and most likely a majority of the remaining forest was badly mismanaged through overgrazing. Turkeys were eliminated from some northeast Iowa counties by 1854, only 20 years after the first settlers arrived, and turkey populations were badly depleted in southern Iowa by 1900. Rugged topography protected some timbered parcels in northeast and south-central Iowa from mechanized clearing and turkeys may have survived had indiscriminate hunting been controlled. Unfortunately, hunting was not controlled and the last wild turkey harvested was in Lucas County in 1907. The last verified sighting of a wild turkey was in 1910, also in Lucas County.

1920-38

As with many other midwestern states, the initial attempts to restore turkeys to available habitat were made with pen-reared turkeys. Although records are incomplete, they do show at least 6 releases made at several scattered locations across the state between 1920-38. All releases are assumed to have

failed and by 1960 there were still no wild turkeys existing in Iowa.

1960-66

In the 1950's the rocket net, a new capture technique, was developed and allowed state agencies to capture and transplant native wild turkeys. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), encouraged by success in other states with transplanted wild stock, attempted releases of non-Eastern subspecies in the 1960's. Thirty-nine Rio Grande turkeys from Texas were released in Allamakee County (release site A, Table 10.2) in 1960-61. Thirteen Merriam's turkeys were released in Lucas County and 8 Merriam's turkeys were released in Monona County in 1966 (releases B and C, respectively). Both subspecies failed to establish thriving populations or expand their distribution. Neither subspecies was adapted to Iowa's climate or habitat and experienced poor survival and no brood production.

1966

Eleven wild turkeys caught in Missouri in 1966 were the first Eastern subspecies released in Iowa. They were released into Iowa's largest contiguous remaining timber block (Shimek State Forest, release site #1). Reproduction and poult survival of these turkeys was excellent and winter flock size increased dramatically reaching 400-500 turkeys by 1974.

1968

The success of the Shimek Forest release led to a second stocking of another 19 Missouri turkeys (Eastern subspecies) into Stephens State Forest (SSF). The

turkeys did equally well in SSF and grew to a 400-500 bird flock by 1974. Within 3 years, turkeys at both forest sites began expanding onto adjacent private forests and by 1971 it was obvious that this was the correct subspecies to be used for all future restoration attempts.

1969

In 1969, 10 supposedly Eastern lineage turkeys from North Dakota were released along the Upper Iowa River (release site D). Although the turkeys survived and reproduced their population growth was minimal compared to the turkeys released in Shimek and Stephens Forests.

1971

In 1971, 10 additional North Dakota turkeys were released in Yellow River State Forest (release site E). The combined population growth of the turkeys from the 1969 and 1971 releases reached only 140 turkeys by 1974 and then declined. Apparently these turkeys were better adapted to North Dakota's open brushy habitat and were unable to adapt to Iowa's oak-hickory forest.

1972-2000

Turkey numbers had grown rapidly enough at Shimek and Stephens Forests that by the winter of 1971-72 the IDNR was able to trap turkeys in-state and transplant to other potential habitats. Since 1965, 3,583 Eastern wild turkeys have been trapped and released at 260 different sites scattered across the state. Generally, turkeys have been released at the rate of 10 hens and 3 adult gobblers per site. Table 10.1 summarizes turkey releases by county including the 5 unsuccessful initial attempts (denoted by A - E on Table 10.2). Table 10.2 lists each release chronologically and the site

numbers correspond to the numbers on Figure 10.5.

OUT-OF-STATE SHIPMENTS

Eastern turkeys adapted so well to habitat conditions in Iowa that by 1980 the DNR decided to start trading turkeys for other extirpated wildlife. From 1980-2001, 7,501 Iowa turkeys have been traded for 356 prairie chickens, 596 ruffed grouse, over 180 river otters, over 80 sharp-tailed grouse, and over 3.2 million dollars to purchase Iowa habitat with 11 states and 1 Canadian province.

Table 10.3 summarizes wild turkey trades from 1980-2000. No out-of-state-shipments have occurred since 2001.

FUTURE

The restoration of wild turkeys in Iowa is complete. Almost all suitable habitat has received at least 1 release of Eastern wild turkeys and all (since 1965) have been successful. Any additional releases will be coordinated by district management biologists within their own district. Most sites that will be stocked are very small parcels of timber or are marginal habitat. The goal now is to maintain and to wisely manage existing turkey populations.

